



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

Fifth Sunday of Lent C



Jesus and the Adulterous Woman
by Nicolas Poussin, 1653, public domain.



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

Prayer in Preparation for Baptism and in Preparation for Renewing Baptismal Promises

Almighty God, who rules all things,
we hasten with eager steps to the venerable font of eternal salvation,
and ask you, Magnificent God,
that you command this font which has been sealed
may be reopened with the keys of your mercy,
and impart to those that thirst a most sweet cup of water.
May the voice of your divinity sound upon these waters,
may the Spirit of your sanctification dwell therein
and bring healing to all ills.
May the abundant streams of paradise flow from it,
that by your goodness heavenly graces
may be bestowed upon these new-born children.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Liber Ordium. *Monumenta Ecclesiae Liturgica*, edd. Cabrol and Leclercq,
Vol. 5, ed. Dom M. Ferotin, Paris, 1904.

Catholic
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& Creed**
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Word worksheets
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Doctrinal Sessions.

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Liturgical Context

- ▶ Today is the Fifth Sunday of Lent. God's incredible reconciling mercy is the theme of today's Gospel.
- ▶ Scrutinies are celebrated with those who are preparing for baptism (elect) at the Easter season. There are three scrutinies. The first scrutiny is celebrated on the Third Sunday of Lent, the second scrutiny is celebrated on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, and the third scrutiny is celebrated on the Fifth Sunday of Lent. Scrutinies are penitential celebrations that help uncover what is still in need of reconciliation and healing in the elect as they prepare for baptism. Cycle A readings are used for the celebration of scrutinies. If a scrutiny is celebrated today it is the third in the series—the Third Scrutiny. Cycle A readings are used—not the readings for this session.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface insights in the wider group. (@Five to seven minutes)

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one or both of the readings. (You may want to concentrate on the Gospel alone.)

First reading: Isaiah 43: 16-21

- ▶ Exiles in captivity await their release.
- ▶ The people remember god's saving action in the exodus. They believe that God will be similarly present to them in the remembering.
- ▶ The people understood their situation as God's righteous punishment for the sin of the people of Israel.
- ▶ However, help is on the way soon.
- ▶ When the text refers to old things it is a reference to God's saving action in history that is past. New things refer to what God is presently doing or will do in the future.
- ▶ Christianity understands the new thing as God's saving action through the life and mission of his Son.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a "brief" story from his or her life. See appendix #1 for an example.

- ▶ Have you ever waited for a better day to come? What helped you as you waited? What is this reading tell us about such waiting?

Second Reading: Philippians 3: 8-14

- ▶ For Paul his life prior to Christ amounted to nothing. His life began when Christ became the center of it.
- ▶ Deviant philosophies were threatening Paul's community. Judaizers insisted on a rigid legalistic adherence to the law, demanding that Gentile converts be circumcised. Gnostics, on the other hand, insisted that baptism was all that was needed for salvation—no effort at all on the part of the baptized person was required.
- ▶ Justice is only realized through the power of Christ and his cross.
- ▶ Christians are to pattern their lives after Christ and his Gospel. They are to live the paschal Mystery—imitate Christ and his sacrificial outpouring offering of self to the world.
- ▶ Christians are to embrace a life of sacrificial service.
- ▶ The race is won only when the race is completed—when life is over. We are to remain vigilant until we draw our last breath.



Mystagogy reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, surface brief insights in wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life. See appendix #2 for an example.

- ▶ If someone were to ask you if you have patterned your life after Christ and his Gospel? How would you respond? What does that mean to you? What evidence is there in your life?

Gospel: John 8: 1-11

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ Jesus saves the woman caught in adultery and challenges her accusers.
- ▶ Jesus' enemies lie in wait and set a trap. Jesus is too clever for them. He evades the trap by use of a wise saying or action.
- ▶ A married woman was caught in adultery. Mosaic law insisted that she was to be stoned. Only the adulterous woman was charged—the man was not charged unless he was a husband found with another man's wife. In that event only the offended husband and two male witnesses could bring a charge.

- ▶ Roman law forbade the death penalty in cases of Jewish religious law.
- ▶ The clever trap that was set was intended to put Jesus either in opposition to the Law of Moses or to Roman law.
- ▶ If Jesus agreed that she should be stoned then he would be accused of not providing a hearing for her case—in itself against the Law of Moses.
- ▶ If he decided against stoning he could be accused of “being soft” on sin, and of being an accomplice.
- ▶ If he participated in stoning her then he would be going against secular Roman law.
- ▶ They thought they had him! Every conceivable choice backed Jesus into a corner. Jesus, however, was too clever for them.
- ▶ Tradition dating to St. Jerome suggested that Jesus was writing the sins of the accusers in the dirt. Some commentators suggest that it was an indictment from the Book of Jeremiah that stated that those who reject God would have their names written on the earth (17:13).
- ▶ Jesus reminded the accusers that those without sin should cast the first stone. He very cleverly referred to Deuteronomy 17:7 which insisted that those who bring witness in a death penalty case are responsible for the person’s death. He is telling them that if they want to assume that responsibility, thereby bringing a similar charge down on their own heads, then by all means continue.
- ▶ This text was concealed for a brief period, as it was believed that Jesus was minimizing the sin of the woman. Jesus did not minimize her sin. He recognized it; he did not belabor it; he told her to avoid the sin in the future. Just as he did throughout his entire ministry, he offered forgiveness and reconciliation.
- ▶ The woman was offered forgiveness but the Pharisees stood accused by their own judgments. Their sin of pride and self-righteousness was far greater than her sexual sin.
- ▶ This is an incredible story of life-giving, life-preserving mercy. He forgave what her accusers understood to be the unforgivable. There is no sin greater than the power of Christ’s healing, reconciling mercy.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix #3 for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ What is the primary message of this Gospel?
- ▶ With whom do you most relate? Jesus? The woman? The angry crowd of Pharisees?
- ▶ We always think or at least hope we would stand with Jesus in such a situation. Yet very often we would stand with the accusers. Imagine that the accused is a

child molester. In Jesus' day the woman's sin would have been considered equally serious. What would your response be in that case?

- What is the challenge of this Gospel? In what way does it invite you to grow in faith and to be a better disciple?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question.

- After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

Concluding Prayer

Option 1. Celebrate a minor rite—an exorcism or blessing for catechumens: RCIA 90-97

Option 2. Pray the Prayer of Pope Clement

Option 3. Other suitable, but brief prayer. (Perhaps pray the Prayer of St. Francis.)

Prayer of Pope Clement XI

Lord, I believe in you: increase my faith.

I trust in you: strengthen my trust.

I love you: let me love you more and more.

I am sorry for my sins: deepen my sorrow.

I worship you as my first beginning.

I long for you as my last end.

I praise you as my constant helper.

And I call you as my loving protector.

I want to do what you ask of me:

In the way you ask, for as long as you ask, because you ask it.

Let me love you Lord as my God.

And see myself as I really am: a pilgrim in this world.

A Christian called to respect and love all those lives I touch.

APPENDIX

1. When my family or I is in the midst of a crisis and all seems lost, my anchor is the history God has forged with us throughout our lives. Yes, I rely on the witness of Scripture, but even more than that I rely on God's palpable action in our lives. When I am desperate for things to change, when I think God has turned a deaf ear I remember the miracles, and the way in which God has accomplished astounding things in our lives. I remember a core event.

My son-in-law was in Afghanistan. He was there for 15 months. We were very anxious for him to come home. Yet he could not tell us when that would be for security reasons. Before he was sent to Afghanistan I gave him a very special sacramental—a family heirloom, a relic of Saint Maria Goretti. A relic is an object that contains a remembrance and commemoration of a certain saint that perhaps included material that was touched to the saint's body or perhaps a bone chip from the saint. Such a relic is a reminder of the great deeds and intercession of the saint whose relic it is. Maria Goretti was a young woman who stood up in the face of violent rape and gave her life in the process. She stood up for her faith in the face of violence.

I sent this relic with my son-in-law and told him we would all be praying for Maria Goretti's intercession so that he would be strong and remain safe in the face of violence.

We knew the time was fast approaching for his return home. My daughter called and told us the amazing news. We were in awe over God's intervention. This was for us a true miracle—an arrangement of events by God to show us how much he loved us, to teach us that we must abandon our lives to God's care and a reminder that we are to trust God in all things—even when it all seems lost.

My son-in-law could not tell us the day or the hour of his return, but he did give us a clue. He told us that he would be returning home nine days from our son's birthday. We quickly checked the Catholic calendar on the wall and much to our amazement nine days from my son's birthday was the feast of Saint Maria Goretti. No words are adequate to express our amazement!

There is a reason that God places such importance on the action of remembering—such is the purpose of the Scriptures. We remember the great deeds of the Lord and we know we are in good hands. When we remember God's great deeds in our lives, we, like the Israelites, are strengthened and uplifted to endure until God acts.

2. If I were asked how I have patterned my life after Christ I would assert that I have a long way to go. I would cite evidence of ways that I have tried to do so in the passion I have for proclaiming the Gospel, preaching a just word and evangelizing others to embrace this amazing Christian/Catholic life. I would cite my love for liturgy and music that supports it as well as the passion I have for poor and suffering people. Even though I feel I never do enough for them, they are emblazoned on my heart and I carry them

with me wherever I go. I see in them the face of Christ and the face of every broken homeless person I have ever encountered.

A friend of mine recently died. I believe God helped me usher this man to his final resting place by spiritually preparing him to embrace the suffering in his life. I was able to share my core belief with him-- that when we embrace the Paschal Mystery in our lives---when we commit to join the joys and sorrows of our lives to the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ, we participate in Jesus' ongoing work of redemption. I believe that in a very small way I was able to help make his passing a little more peaceful.

3. A young boy who was very close to me was seeing a therapist to help him through a situation at school. The therapist routinely molested this young adolescent for several years. When I discovered what had happened I was filled with rage. Had this man stood where the adulterous woman stood I would have wanted to be the first stone-thrower.

I often thought of this Gospel as the hatred grew in me. This was an innocent child. I prayed that I could extend similar mercy to the man that Christ extended to the woman.

I entrusted the man to God's care, believing him to be a sick individual in need of redemption that only God could give. I prayed for his victim that the scars would be healed and that he could have a normal productive life. God granted that request in triplicate. God healed the young boy. He is a very happy, well- adjusted adult today.

The very courageous young boy was prepared to bring charges against the man so he could not hurt other children. This would have caused him great pain, but he was willing to do it for the sake of other victims. The man discovered that he was being investigated and committed suicide.

I knew the molester therapist. I had had many conversations with him. I had recommended him. I considered him a friend. I was unaware of his very dark side. I did not know the monster that lurked within him. I only knew a kind man who seemed to care for children and who spoke often about his Catholic roots and upbringing.

He was a sick individual. God loved him as much as he loved his victim. I often wonder how this passage would apply to such a person. God would have extended the same mercy to him. God would have spared his life. God would have healed him. God would have challenged him to sin no more. God would have challenged me to forgive him and not to sit in judgment.

This story is an object lesson in judgments and in God's incredible mercy. There is a reason Jesus tells us we are not to judge. We cannot see into the human heart. I knew this man; I knew the goodness that resided in him. I did not know about his sinful side—a side we all have to varying degrees.

There is truth in the axiom: "There but for the grace of God go I." It is very possible that

this man was less responsible for his sin than I am for the sins I regularly commit. Only God can unlock the keys of the human heart. God's mercy runs deep. It is beyond our imaginings. Only God can peer deeply into the human soul and thus only God can pass judgment. God's mercy is far greater than human sin. Thank God that God is one that extends it. If left to human beings, very little mercy would be shown. Sadly, many of us would stand with the Pharisees ready to condemn.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Sacrament of Reconciliation
Morality

Moral Decision Making
Sin and Grace

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the index of doctrinal topics and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

Lent is a time we focus on the areas of sin in our lives and our need for God's mercy. It is also a time when the church offers multiple opportunities to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation. The sacrament of reconciliation brings us out of the darkness into the Light of Christ. Jesus offers forgiveness to the adulterous woman in today's Gospel. He challenges her accusers not to sit in judgment. He offers her incredible mercy. The sacrament of reconciliation continues Jesus' reconciling, healing ministry for us today. Today's doctrinal session will focus on the SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION.

MORALITY

Today's liturgy is an invitation to consider the moral life. Yes, the adulterous woman was a sinner. Jesus did not deny her sin; he challenged it, offered forgiveness and saved her life. The Pharisees were culpable of sin in that they sat in judgment of the woman. We are all called to live the moral life. It is important that we take time out during Lent to discover what that means for our lives. Thus today's session will focus on Christian Morality.

MORAL DECISION MAKING

Today's liturgy is an invitation to consider the decisions we make and if they are in conformity with the Gospel. Making moral decisions is about right choices. The woman did not make the right choice, nor did her accusers. Jesus always extends his unfathomable mercy. The Church, however, guides us in our responsibility to make appropriate choices for our lives. Today's session will focus on Moral Decision Making.

SIN AND GRACE

Today's Gospel uncovers the sin of the adulterous woman and the sin of the Pharisees who sat in judgment of her. Lent is a time when we consider the sins in our lives. Today is an extended reflection not just on the sin in our lives, but the antidote to sin that is grace. Today's session will address sin, our need for God's mercy and the mercy given through the gift of God's self—GRACE. Our extended session will focus on Sin and Grace.